Doll Culture

One of the most characteristic examples of girls' material culture, the idea of the doll as a small representation of a human and as a popular toy, unravels under closer scrutiny. Some doll-like figures have a functional existence that extends beyond play, such as the artist's lay figure or the small mannequins sold along with miniature cutout patterns to teach girls the basic skills of home dressmaking in the 1930s and 1940s. Dolls have also found a serious place in the educational curriculum. Dressing a doll circa 1900 frequently replaced the task of making a sewing sampler so that girls in rudimentary public schooling could learn sewing skills. Dolls from other countries or dressed in national costumes have often been employed in the schoolroom to encourage children's interest in different cultures. Such activities continue today often at an informal level or supplemented with picture books and other learning materials. However, this use of dolls was particularly widespread in the 1920s and 1930s, extending to collections of dolls housed in publicly run children's museums and in museum "education," "community," and "outreach" programs. In the era between the world wars the exchange of "friendship dolls" between North American and Japanese school children, at a time of heightened international tensions, serves to indicate the role of diplomatic agency that dolls were seen as filling at the level of everyday culture. Many of these dolls were demoted from their cherished positions in classroom displays and were summarily and publicly "executed" when hostilities broke out. Functional dolls may be misread later in history as having been play dolls, and vice versa. Likewise, misreading across cultures may misidentify religious and ritual figures as toys. Even Christian figures from the Roman Catholic tradition before early modern times, with their elaborately sewn garments reflecting fashionable, courtly dress and accessories, can be mistaken by collectors and dealers for play dolls.

Although it is assumed that women will put aside dolls upon leaving their girlhood years, there are myriad male and female interactions with dolls, from work-based to leisure, from closeted secret activity to hobby to commercial enterprise. Buying and selling dolls at "doll fairs" and on the Internet is a significant business in North America and elsewhere. Dolls also overlap into the category of decorative figurines and statuettes for children and adults, especially the many types of non-jointed dolls and dolls with elaborate porcelain, resin, or plastic detailing. Academic literature that addresses issues related to the quality of childhood experiential and material culture and the appropriate role of capitalism in childhood, often ignores the irony and sophistication of adult reactions to and engagement with dolls and their extension downward into girlhood.

Aside from their use in play narratives and activities, dolls can play many other roles in the material culture of girls' lives. Dolls can function as aspects of their room decor, housewares, accessories, and even jewelry. In the latter context one may include the small figures on beaded chains and tassels popular for decorating mobile phones and also pens and pencils, South American worry dolls, and certain Mattel Liddle Kiddles of the 1960s, which could be worn as necklaces. There are eras when the preferred representational aspect of doll formats is decidedly naturalistic and other times, as in the 1960s and the present, when abstract and distorted doll formats appeal to buyers.
A human identity for a doll is not necessarily a given. Since the early 1900s soft animal toys and teddy bears have shared many of the play and comfort functions of dolls. Hello Kitty, internationally famous, has a feline head but an essentially human body form and wears many different clothes and takes on a variety of looks. Similar cat and dog dolls were produced throughout the twentieth century, starting with porcelain versions, including those by Heubach. The Five-in-One doll (1912) was dressed as a middle-class girl, with a girl's body and a set of interchangeable heads, including a molded celluloid cat head with glass eyes, made in Germany. Trolls and German Mecki Hedgehog dolls are other anthropomorphic dolls that have enjoyed great popularity in the last half-century. In recent years many toy horses, cats, and dogs marketed explicitly at girls have featured long nylon hair that allows for Barbie-style “hair play.” These animals are supplied with many accessories, including garments and hair ornaments, by their manufacturers, following the Mattel pattern of aggressively marketing a wide range of desirable add-ons without which the doll or doll play would not be complete. My Little Pony is a perennial example of this genre. These animal toys are closely related to modern dolls and doll products.

DOLLS 1900-1945

The predominant doll formats around 1900 were German bisque dolls, with cheaper dolls of glazed porcelain, wood and papier-mâché. Bisque, matte glazed porcelain, was particularly prized for its ability to subtly capture the texture and toning of human skin. No material used in subsequent years has matched this mimetic capacity, and perhaps this led to the return of bisque dolls as ornaments of girls' lives in the 1980s. The illusionistic potential of bisque was apparent in even in relatively cheap models, giving it a popularity that more than compensated for its capacity to shatter. Celluloid dolls were also produced around 1900. Like all early plastic items, they closely imitated more expensive and highly regarded materials; thus these plastic dolls, which resembled bisque dolls, were fixed to kid leather or jointed composition bodies as were bisque heads. These German dolls were generally fashioned as images of little girls, frequently bearing a solemn, calm expression and a slightly slimmer, longer figure than was the norm for later dolls. The most favored body type was the ball-jointed composition and wood strung with elastic. Thus these dolls were both more fragile and far more flexible than typical dolls later in the century.

The majority of these dolls came from two cities in east central Germany. The trade was split roughly into two parts: Sonneberg was known for the ordinary but thoroughly acceptable grade of doll, and Waltershausen produced the more expensive models, although Sonneberg also exported a small number of extremely fine dolls. The general quality level of the Sonneberg dolls is far superior to the cheap plastic dolls produced in the second half of the twentieth century. Although assembly and shipping were concentrated in factories, the majority of steps needed to complete a doll, including the modeling of individual components and limbs, wig making, shoe making, and box construction, were broken down into small segments and performed by thousands of home-based workers living around the main centers, who brought their items to a central factory and received pay and materials for the next week's work. Porcelain head making required kilns and heavy equipment, and so it was generally concentrated in the factories. Doll production was engaged in by all family members to maximize the income stream. The sad irony that German doll producers employed girls who were the same age as the girls in other
countries who played with the exported dolls did not go unnoted in the press at the turn of the century. Even children nominally enrolled in public schools worked after hours on doll production. The trade was international in its scope, and prior to about 1940 most girls born into families from the prosperous end of the working class and higher in any urban center around the world, race and cultural context notwithstanding, owned at least one German bisque doll.

There were smaller numbers of bisque dolls made in other countries, including the United States, but most notably France, which had supported a luxury doll industry over the previous half-century. By around 1900 this industry was in serious decline due to German companies’ ability to provide product of solid quality at much lower price. The French dolls’ personae were elegant and overtly sensuous—even ecstatic—in expression, foreshadowing the imbrication of dolls and sexuality often attributed to Barbie and, more recently, Bratz, and blurring the adult/child boundary. The French doll look also predated the melding of provocative sophistication of grooming with children’s physical proportions exemplified by the child beauty pageant queen by about a century, albeit in a far less tawdry context. This precedent may not excuse these sexualized, “prostitut” representations, but it does suggest that these cultural idioms have a far longer history in narratives of taste and styling than is usually assumed and are not expressions specific to late American capitalism.

The first significant change in the market was the appearance of baby and character dolls by around 1910. The character doll was modeled to express a certain emotion, from pensiveness to glee, depending upon the model. Some were actual portraits of living children, including relatives of the dollmakers and celebrities such as Princess Juliana of the Netherlands. On occasion notable sculptors, such as Levin-Funke, created the face model, and the design was publicly credited to them. The baby doll made its first substantial impact on the market at this time and reflected the gender roles that were standard in modern industrial-military states. An urban myth claims that one doll is the portrait of a member of the German imperial family, although accounts differ as to which one, with the candidates spanning three generations. This so-called Kaiser Baby was among the most popular of the character dolls, while the sweet-faced My Dream Baby perhaps was the longest-surviving, widely produced throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Kammer and Reinhardt’s mold 126 also established a doll type that remains highly visible 80 years later, that of a laughing, chubby baby or toddler (depending on the body configuration). A similar product is now produced in plastic rather than bisque, but the persona is identical.

World War I prompted a major upheaval and shift of power in the doll world. German doll products became harder to find in 1914–1916, although dolls were still being produced as a major source of foreign income from neutral countries, often in the face of extreme supply shortages (dolls’ eyelashes were made of sewing cotton rather than bristle or sable, for example). With the entry of the United States into the war in 1917, new German dolls became impossible to obtain. The United States came to the forefront as a new site for the mass production of dolls and there were dramatic changes to the formats available. U.S. doll makers preferred unbreakable materials and favored a chubby toddler-infant form with simplified jointing and hair and eye detailing. Many dolls had cloth toddler bodies with swinging legs that gave the effect of walking when the doll was swung from side to side. Other dolls from the United States referenced early newspaper comics characters such as the Yellow Kid and the Katzenjammer Kids. They featured the exaggerated shapes and characterizations of these cartoon characters. France, Italy, South Africa, and Australia also were forced to make substitute products during the war.
North American dollmakers’ chosen formats also were more in keeping than were European doll formats with changes in the cultural placement of dolls. The emerging disciplines of psychiatry and psychology made pronouncements upon dolls and endorsed dolls that were unbreakable and allowed for hands-on training in “mothering” activities, such as washing and feeding. Rubber and celluloid were now seen as more suitable for doll production than porcelain as they allowed for practical mothering activities in play. Advertisements for dolls in 1920s North America offered quasi-psychological literature to assist adult buyers in making the correct doll purchase. One advertisement suggested that the baby doll was an antidote to “race suicide” (Peers 2005), a reference to Oswald Spengler’s theories about the growing power of inferior races with higher birth rates over whites. According to pseudo-scientific discourse, the white races were also being depopulated by selfish feminists refusing to have babies. This change in doll usage reflected middle-class women’s changing roles in the home after the war, when servants for housekeeping and child rearing duties were less affordable than in the early 1900s, and domestic drudgery was therefore represented as essential rather than as insulting to the female image.

As dolls were becoming closely identified with medicalized norms of girls’ behavior, many adult doll-type products began production in the 1920s and 1930s. Some of these, such as the Lenci felt dolls from Italy, crossed over from adult mascot or living room decorations into the realm of children’s toys. Others—such as the pin cushion dolls and porcelain dolls in the shape of hair tidies, bookends, perfume bottles, vases, powder bowls, powderpuffs, lamp bases and face brooches—would have been familiar items to the younger teen at least in their personal home environment and their mother’s room, if not standing on the girl’s dressing table or decorating her bedroom. During the 1920s, it was trendy for adult women to carry dolls in public, especially in urban areas, as a fashion accessory, and perfume flasks, purses and handbags were produced with doll or teddy bear faces. The Nancy Ann Story Book Company of California produced small dolls in series that encouraged young girls to collect the whole set. The Nancy Ann dolls crossed over from the younger play audience to a young adult audience, who regarded them as mascots and ornaments. Because the Nancy Ann dolls were extremely popular, the company had to switch to locally produced dolls when the supply sources in Axis countries became unavailable during World War II.

German bisque dolls continued to be produced into the war years, and the industry remained a crucially important one to the national economies of the Second and Third Reichs as well as the Weimar Republic. The doll trade halted due to lack of infrastructure, but to lack of manpower because of military conscription. Despite popular belief, the doll factories were neither bombed by the Allies nor substantially looted by the Russians for plant and equipment in the postwar years. Only after the post-1989 reunification were the production lines stripped and the buildings razed for property speculation and other newly arisen opportunities for short-term capital gain, and only then was the capacity for doll production rendered apparently unfeasible. There is a persistent myth that some factories resumed production—even during the Eastern bloc years—with their output directed to the adult collector market, not to girls, which now floods eBay and antique auctions and fairs in the United States and elsewhere. As these items are sold as “antiques,” their corporate and craft network origins are generally denied, with the products claimed to have emerged from pre–World War II “hidden storehouses.” Thus the seemingly irrelevant child’s doll has become part of the complex, unstable experience of the Eastern bloc’s adaptation to capitalist processes and values. If the old doll factories
were manufacturing “antiques” for cash-laden United States buyers, then the doll played its part in economically supporting the East German state, just as it did the previous German regimes. Likewise, the extensive cultural and economic capital contributions of the doll and toys generally to the United States throughout the middle and late twentieth century should not be overlooked.

During World War II, dolls in military dress reflected the times and notably included the new female service personnel. In the United States dolls again performed functions in adult as well as in play cultures as they featured prominently in domestic “shrines” to service personnel on active duty overseas, serving as a more tangible, three-dimensional touchstone to the absent relative than a photograph. Paper dolls became popular due to wartime shortages of materials. Just as in the Depression when their price made paper dolls the only dolls that poorer families could afford for their daughters, they were often the only new doll product that was freely available. In both Allied and Axis countries, older nineteenth-century porcelain dolls, with or without fashionable makeovers such as shorter haircuts and modern dress, were given to girls as compensation for the lack of new product or the limitations on purchases due to rationing. Small dolls also were used as good-luck mascots to protect against injury, as they had in the previous world war by both civilians and combatants. In World War II such dolls as well as teddy bears were favored by pilots and rode in many a warplane.

DOLLS 1945–1950s

Soon after the war, dolls became part of the plastic revolution. By 1950 plastic—first hard plastics and later softer plastics such as vinyl—was the preferred material for commercial dolls. Synthetic materials now also provided doll wigs, as they do to this day. Plastic also replaced glass as the preferred material for dolls’ eyes. Likewise, leather shoes were replaced by plastic ones as the doll became even more of an industrial object. The norm for the doll product at mid-century was set by Ideal, Horsman, and Effanbee of the United States; Pedigree, Roddy, and Rosebud of the UK; and Regal of Canada. Despite the different geographical locations, the product was often remarkably similar in format and style. For many people these dolls are the quintessential form—plain and childlike, with a sweet, generalized expression and wearing girls’ fashions, often in the form of printed cottons. This postwar concept of the doll obscures the many different and alternative doll formats that were produced. These solid, plain little-girl dolls have generally disappeared from production a half century later; an exception is the UK Amanda Jane Company, which has moved from a bourgeois to an elite style due to its old-fashioned aura. A similar development has occurred with U.S.-based Vogue’s Ginny, who was a star of the postwar doll world, as well as the products of the Terri Lee Company, also were widely popular. Both companies’ dolls remain in production six decades later. Madame Alexander of New York catered to a more upscale market, as did the UK’s Chiltern and, later, Sasha dolls. Sasha dolls are renowned for possessing a solid intellectuality, despite their bizarre origins as representations of Holocaust victims.

The development of adult fashion dolls with high-heeled shoes and molded breasts in the mid-1950s led to an explosion in dolls of this format, though slightly larger than the 11.5-inch norm of today. The earliest was undoubtedly Madame Alexander’s Cissy in 1955. Cissy was presented as an upper-class debutante or glamorous model/magazine icon, a depiction of those women who in the interwar period and up to the late 1940s/early
1950s in the top end of the market were as often society women as paid professionals; the latter finally took over as models for fashion photography in the middle to late 1950s. When Madame Alexander's New York childhood as a poor east-end immigrant is factored into the equation, Cissi becomes even more complex. An enterprising, highly gifted woman, Bertha Alexander as a child had watched, from the pavement in 1890s New York, white upper-class beauties wearing feathered hats drive by in carriages, and she declared—to the surprise of her family—that she wanted to be one of those ladies. Fashions and lifestyles changed, and the adult Bertha acquired neither her carriage nor her feathered hat, but she became a wealthy woman by marketing and retailing, under the more aristocratic name and persona of Madame Beatrice Alexander, a hybrid of upper-class (white) beauty with an Old Testament vision of the strong Jewish heroine, such as Esther or Judith, in the form of a doll product. Her dolls were stylish and yet encoded with a feminist intent, paying tribute to women of virtue and self-reliance—Queen Elizabeth II, Margot Fonteyn, Louisa May Alcott, and the tempestuous yet resourceful Scarlett O'Hara, the survivor of male-instigated war and disorder.

Barbie was a late entrant into this market, appearing in 1959 and drawing her form from a popular European doll, Bild Lilli, which was originally marketed as an adult novelty but was rapidly commandeered by children. Barbie was a runaway success, going through three editions in the first year, with the third edition produced in extremely large quantities, firmly establishing the singular popularity that she would enjoy for the next four years and beyond. This success was undoubtedly supported by the glamorous and chic television campaigns launched by Mattel in the 1950s, indicating how closely the company was attuned to new formats and processes of marketing. These stylish television advertisements ratified the position of dolls within the postwar dream and used the familiar imagery of the perfectly groomed and poised woman that appeared in many commercials of the 1950s. Toys and dolls were a sign of U.S. postwar prosperity and the spending power of families, as baby boomer children amassed more toys than even the elites of previous generations. In the 1950s Italian papier-mâché dolls were extremely expensive and beautifully designed, and were among the few alternatives to plastic dolls and dolls of U.S. origin. They were often taller than the usual doll, between 3 and 4 feet high and usually dressed in Victorian crinolines and picture hats. Because they were physically impressive, they were used as parlor and living room decorations as well as being girls' toys.

**DOLLS 1960s–1970s**

The 1960s were dominated by manufacturers' desperate attempts to decrypt or improve on the seemingly undefeatable Barbie formula—including the British Sindy, who was the most successful of these rival dolls. She was consciously developed to counter the explicit U.S. cultural references in the Barbie narrative and is still celebrated among Britons as an icon of resistance to the global reach of North America. Mary Quant, the most internationally successful British designer of the early 1960s, is believed to have provided advice about Sindy's wardrobe. Sindy's boyfriend, Paul, is believed to have been a reference to Paul McCartney of the Beatles—again a nationalist entry in the contest of the world's public cultures.

There were Barbie clones from many different nations in both Europe and Asia. Some of these dolls were directly copied after Mattel products and often were offered at a lower
price, because authentic Mattel products in the early days of Barbie were extremely expensive outside of the United States. Thus such dolls were not always regarded as “cheap” or tawdry. Barbie’s cost, which was seen as beyond the reach of ordinary families, and the urgent pleas girls made to their parents to buy them a Barbie were also read as part of a pernicious plot by America to destabilize the family unit and the economies of countries beyond its shores. In the last 20 years Mattel has marketed its product at a more accessible price as the dolls have lost their luxury status and presentation.

Technology began to be applied in earnest to novelty doll products of this period. There were innumerable battery-powered dolls, both iconic branded products and unnamed. Typical novelty dolls of the period were Chatty Cathy, Dancerina, Tiny Thumbelina, and Giggles. Inevitably these dolls would break and were too expensive to be replaced. From Tressy to Chrissy, the growing-hair doll, whose hair was wound and unrolled on spindle inside her head, was a very popular novelty of this period. Simpler mechanisms, such as crying (e.g., Ideal’s Tearie Dearie) and drinking/wetting dolls, were also very popular. Parents and adults may have seen in these dolls admirable images of maternal care and devotion, while children may have enjoyed the more prurient implications of the “wetting” dolls and their soaked panties.

Bizarre-shaped dolls were also popular among designers of the middle to late 1960s and into the 1970s, including Flatsy, Blythe, Little Sophisticates, Little Miss Sad Eyes, and the Liddle Kiddles. Another high-profile, strangely shaped doll format of the 1960s were the rag dolls with extremely long legs and dolls made of cord and strung-together puffs of material, often taking the form of clowns but also girls and women. These dolls were often seen lounging on beds and chairs. For teenage girls of the period the beautiful, large-eyed, animé-inspired Bradley rag dolls (made in Japan), which had hand-painted organza faces over molded (plastic) masks and were sometimes mounted on lamp bases and music boxes, were standard bedroom fixtures. Often they wore exotic international costumes or Victorian and Marie Antoinette styles. Another successful manifestation of this interest in novelty doll formats conceived to counter Barbie were the miniature Dawn dolls, which outsold Barbie until 1977, a few years later, when Superstar Barbie won back most girls. These dolls had an extensive, but tiny, wardrobe of mid-1970s fashions.

Troll dolls of various sizes, with their wildly colored long hair, were a massive doll fad of the mid-1960s that extended to boys and adults. Small trolls were made to fit on the end of a pencil and often invoked school teachers’ wrath in this era, when play was still seen as suspect in the primary school curriculum. It was popular to keep collections of different-size trolls as a family—although the dolls were genderless, as they had no genitals and generally wore no clothes. Their faces were masculine and wizened, but friendly and good-hearted. Troll hair featured bright colors, and although the first dolls were made of flesh-colored plastic and hair, later, cheaper trolls came in many bizarre combinations of hair and body colors. Thus they could be seen as an aspect of the questioning of gender and other conventionalities of the late 1960s. The original dolls came from Scandinavia but most were copied in Hong Kong and other cheaper markets. Like the other bizarre-shaped novelty dolls, trolls brought visual signifiers of the unstable, psychedelic, spaced-out world of late 1960s San Francisco into the culture childhood. Cereal box toys, exported in the millions from Australia to United States breakfast food manufacturers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, although often regarded as “boys’ toys,” were also cherished by girls and shared with trolls the androgynous, indefinable body and mind-blowing range of unnatural colors in representing a small figure.
The most beautiful and conventional dolls of this period were the stylish Ideal dolls of the Chrissy family, including Velvet and Tiffany Taylor. The sculpting made their faces and bodies seem assured and appealing, with a strong evocation of an individualist persona. The dolls' dressing was an elegant reflection of early 1970s fashion: miniskirts in chocolate-colored velvet and coarse orange lace, which make the dolls perfect documents of the design values of the period. On the other hand, the early 1970s was a down period for Mattel as Ideal came to the forefront (until Superstar Barbie restored the former hierarchy). This oeuvre of beautiful, quality Ideal dolls marks the end of a fairly straight and formal vision of doll making that had dominated since the renaissance. One can easily track the pedigree of this solid and predictable definition of the doll trade back to early nineteenth-century Germany, and certainly earlier, with—sadly—far less material evidence. After the 1970s, doll production ceased to be a solid central point of reference in marketing products to and for girls, becoming increasingly diffused amid a white noise of both competing—and therefore diverse—and similar—and thus indistinguishable—products. Also, the increasing decline in both price and production values in some ways debased the doll, although dolls were now being seen more widely and in greater numbers than previously in their history. More little girls had more dolls than ever before.

SHIFTS IN DOLL CULTURE: 1970s—1980s

Although this essay focuses on the material culture of the doll, by the 1970s there appears to have been a diffusing and debasing in girls' play and personal relationships to the doll. It is impossible to comment with certainty about doll play activities of the past due to the general neglect of children as sources of historic witness. The picture is also distorted somewhat by a strong preference in the few academic treatments of dolls toward tracking historical evidence of a 1970s-style, second-wave refusal of the doll as a constriction, rather than a celebration, of femaleness, as is found in the writing of nineteenth-century British novelist George Eliot. Given these cautions about evidence, significant changes in the attitudes toward dolls appear to have taken place around the 1970s. Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel A Little Princess (1905) can be taken as epitomizing an earlier view. It focuses on Emily, a singularly large and expensive doll engaged in an imagined dialogue with her owner, Sara, notable in her persona and her possessions. Sara nearly forfeits her angelic status when she meanly accuses Emily of indifference and lack of concern. Burnett assumed that Emily could supply both concern and empathy for her owner perhaps because of her elegance and status as lovely object—bypassing puritanical fears of physical beauty and of the chimeric, seductive qualities of material objects. Many other Victorian and Edwardian doll stories similarly imaged the doll as a persona in her own right, a mature but small-scale being.

By the 1970s and 1980s most dolls belonged to a range of cheap consumer items, thousands of plastic toys bought cheaply, discarded promptly, broken easily, and prone to becoming physically damaged and dirty. Anyone who has been to garage sales, church fairs, and thrift shops is familiar with the grubby doll bodies piled, concentration camp style, in what North American poet Denise Duhamel has called the "mass grave of a toy chest." Discarded dolls are now merely so much industrial pollution and space taken up in landfill. Naked dolls with unruly hair in dreadlocks are carried by their ankles by girls through shopping malls, rather than being wheeled in prams or dressed up in hat and gloves for a promenade. This change should not be read only as a sign of cultural decline.
It indicates the greater educational and lifestyle opportunities offered to girls, who once were expected to dress, to maintain, and to entertain their dolls as a demonstration of female responsibility, as a reflection of either the class and social consciousness of the Victorian era or the approved mothering activities of the psychologized 1920s–1960s. Cheap, disposable dolls mean that doll products are available to virtually every child in any industrialized society in the world.

The diffusion and debasing of the doll also illustrates the modern capitalist shifting of production out of industrialized and into developing nations, particularly those of Asia. This process of moving doll production out of the United States to cheaper facilities abroad (while keeping the same price point) was begun by Mattel. The loss of an idea of value being associated with an individual item also can be seen as relating to the manner, during the last two decades or so, in which virtue resides no longer in a specific object, but in the media and discourse surrounding it—the value-added-ness of marketing, graphic design, branding, and communication that has become the core metaphor of current society. Not surprisingly, these changes were substantially brokered once again by Mattel, which regained the centrality of doll production with Superstar Barbie in 1977 and has flooded the world with constantly changing Barbie products ever since. Constant change keeps the products at the forefront of the market and ensures that the buyer never has enough products. Even Barbie’s origins now seem somewhat conservative, with the one cherished doll and the wardrobe of haute couture outfits carefully stored in the dollcase. The wide range of original items still available for vintage Barbie collectors is a testament to the love and care given by so many girls nearly half a century ago to their Barbie dolls. There is now a Darwinian hierarchy of Barbies in most middle-class homes from the pristine collector Barbie on the dressing table or the bedroom shelf to the dirty, scribbled upon, limbless Barbies for bath play in the bathrooms.

As for the more nostalgic dolls that have been produced especially since the 1970s, they are also conscious constructs and, in some ways, are essentially meaningless—from the various evangelical and Protestant Christian symbols of newly devised, trivial sentimental traditions and “precious moments,” to the intellectualizing, even slightly left-wing, but upper-class, American Girl dolls. Real middle-class girls, especially older ones, may not be playing with dolls at any given time. They could be doing anything, from playing soccer to making money through a soft porn real-life blog.

Following the general swing in the 1970s toward nostalgia in middle-range product design, from Laura Ashley, to Crabtree and Evelyn, to Royal Albert, to the Little House on the Prairie television series, a strong market emerged for sentimental dolls such as Holly Hobbie, Matilda, Penny Brite, and Strawberry Shortcake. These were self-consciously “girlie” dolls, but they represented only a pastiche of Victorian style and said more about conservative Christian values in the United States than about any intellectually credible interest in design history. Both Holly Hobbie and Strawberry Shortcake also had their own series of greeting cards, plaques, and posters, with sweet homilies, produced by companies such as Hallmark, indicating the imbrication of another major U.S. company with girlhood—as well as the linkage between card producers, publishers of religious material, and girlhood. Though these products may seem to celebrate girlhood, Strawberry Shortcake, with her metaphor of pastries and desserts as naming devices, served to remind women that they were items to be consumed—eaten—and that they had to mask their natural bodies and environment with scented products. This suggests an overlapping of the doll industry with the petrochemical industry, the household cleaning product industry,
the cosmetics and fragrance industries, and even the vast middle-class vanilla sex toy and marital aid industry—which should not be read as disjunctive to an ordered social structure. Strawberry Shortcake inducts girls to be consumers of all these many governing agencies of everyday life. In this way, these dolls can be considered as disturbing as the continually maligned Barbie.

Although different in tenor, another core doll product of the 1970s were Mego’s celebrity dolls, depicting a wide range of performers from Donny and Marie Osmond to Cher to Charlie’s Angels to Brooke Shields. Celebrity dolls have remained a staple of doll making to the present. In the late 1970s a variant of the celebrity doll, Star Wars figures as a marketing product of the first three Lucas films in this series, established another crossover between boys’ and girls’ toys. They also allowed doll-type products to be marketed to boys while leaving them free of any anxieties about their future sexual orientation. Lord of the Rings figures, Harry Potter, and images of various soccer stars are later manifestations of this trend. Star Wars figures also established the booming secondary market for modern toys and dolls at inflated prices and the concocted “collectible,” again at an inflated price, that is an important aspect of the overall doll market of the late twentieth century. Collectible dolls are often given as presents to girls by doting parents and grandparents, as well as being bought as personal items by adult women.

Mattel regained market dominance, as noted earlier, with Superstar Barbie in 1977; it then established the hot pink format for doll packaging that has remained to the present day. Superstar Barbie, whose name derives from the aesthetic of Andy Warhol, brought the spirit of disco and 1980s visible excess to the world of dolls through her looks and her personal styling. Barbie was also firmly reinvented as camp—a fact that is often piously overlooked by the family market—although Mattel ensured that there were both bourgeois and queer Barbies available in any given range of releases. In 1981 the African American version became Barbie and no longer Christie—a Barbie friend and secondary character. Mattel has a long history of employing a racially diverse staff, and many white Barbies have in fact been styled by non-white-bread designers, which raises the question of whether she is a parody as much as a celebration of white dominance.

Very different were the Cabbage Patch Kids dolls, which went from a cottage industry in 1976 to a national brand in 1983, when they were commercially licensed to Coleco, later to be taken over by Mattel. Cabbage Patch dolls were a publicist’s dream, with their public ritual of being born and named in the Babyland General Hospital of Cleveland, Georgia, and the purchaser’s “adoption” of the doll, with the appropriate papers. They also had a lively presence in North American urban mythologies. In addition, these dolls were an embodiment of vernacular, working-class, rural American life—in contrast to the New York and Long Island Madame Alexander dolls and Californian Barbie—with their self-consciously white trash names and their weird, presumably inbred physicality that highlighted and critiqued prejudicial stereotypes by making them absurdly prominent. At first the doll was a folk product affectionately imbued with social satire and commentary, a good-natured traveler from the lowest level of white society throughout the United States. The name suggested subsistence farming and lack of gastronomic sophistication, but they in fact constituted a subversive act of revenge by the defeated South, the backwoods hicks, first against their colonizer and next the world. The familial and craft origins were lost, however, once the concept was sold to larger commercial concerns when demand far outstripped local production. My Child was Mattel’s “homely doll,” with wide appeal to middle-class girls in the 1980s, and it is again collected by them now as adults.
Their features were less distorted than those of the Cabbage Patch dolls, with whom they were intended to compete. Though My Child is loved by collectors and now commands four-figure sums at auctions, its base substance of fluffy flocked plastic is among the least attractive of all late-twentieth-century doll materials—a somewhat remarkable achievement given the wide scope of the field of potential rivals for this distinction.

**DOLLS 1980s–2000s**

The 1980s witnessed a substantial revival of porcelain dolls in the retail market. Most of them were cheaply made in Asia and included male dolls, Pierrots, and Charlie Chaplins, as well as girls and women in Victorian dress. Simultaneously there was a demand for a range of expensive European and nostalgically designed porcelain dolls in elaborate dresses, such as those by Annette Himstead and Hildegarde Gunzel. Also in the 1980s there was a crossover between girls' bedroom ornaments and adult decorating culture and collectible dolls. Again this indicates a linkage between dolls and the overall pattern of design history in relation to the spirit of play and the sense of Homo Ludens in general 1980s design from architectural toys to Memphis products. Fantasy and lowbrow Celtic revival culture brought us Jem—the glam punk rock doll with a mystical capacity to self-transform, change shape, and heroically right wrongs—and She-Ra: Princess of Power—a fantasy/classical-style swordfighter predating Xena Warrior Princess.

Barbie dominated the market until the early 2000s through continued novelty of function and dress. All other doll product designers scrambled to keep up; even Sindy, the most persistent of all rivals, finally imploded after having been “surgically altered” bit by bit over two decades to more closely resemble her nemesis. She is no longer available internationally and has been through about three makeovers in the last decade in the British market. Throughout the later twentieth century there were attempts at “anti-Barbies,” from Happy to Be Me to Get Real Girls, but with the exception of the American Girl line, none has captured the public's fancy to any significant degree.

American Girl dolls of the 1980s and 1990s were a means of intellectualized resistance to Barbie, with their lessons about crucial periods and events in U.S. history and their imaginative reinsertion of girls into the narrative of national development. Sadly, few other nations have endeavored to assemble a similar narrative to this one, which, though undoubtedly faux, is intriguing insofar as one can conceive of rebuilding the polis and the national agora with a little girl as informed witness, if not player. Effanbee in the late 1930s produced a historical series that also envisioned the development of the United States through doll-girls—most wearing crinolines. Thus Madame Alexander’s Scarlettts also stand as reminders that the nation was made by women as much as men and that males’ narratives of nation building through noble conflict are as fabricated and shaky as women's romantic narratives. Yet what was certainly most successful about the American Girl narrative was the expensive fantasy, retail, tea-party, exhibition, and theatre venue developed as the central command center, the American Girl Place. The first branch was in Chicago. Smaller American Girl Places, minus the theatre space, are starting to open in major regional centers across the United States. This elitist aspect is not much different from the doll salons of the second Napoleonic empire or the whimsical neo-rococo chateaux in Japan, Korea, and now California, where currently Asian ball-jointed dolls priced at US$1000+ are presented to new owners. Of course, these doll headquarters also copy the deep South Cabbage Patch doll birthing facility, where the dolls of the same
name emerged to greet their new owners amid applause 20 years earlier. The American Girl Place is an extremely complex facility purpose built to serve the needs of young girls and those buying essentially play dolls for them. Ironically, the American Girl brand ended up as a Mattel subsidiary.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the market for Madame Alexander staples—ballerina, Little Women, and Gone With the Wind dolls—remained strong. Concurrently, Baby Born and other European-style baby dolls kept alive older doll paradigms as well as the doll's function as facilitating correct mothering even though the fascist and imperial societies that created the baby doll were supposedly long defeated. Many baby dolls now were gendered anatomically. Mattel increasingly cross-marketed dolls with other major corporate names during the 1990s. The partners were not only couture houses for the collectors' market and the upper-class market, but also various suburban brands, like Little Debbie, Avon, Disney World, McDonald's, the "Got Milk?" campaign, and Coca-Cola. Mattel was not the only cross-marketer of dolls. McDonald's cross-marketed with Takara Corporation in Japan the much-loved Jenny and Lucca (wearing McDonald's uniforms).

In the United States Happy Meals of the 2000s feature miniature jointed Madame Alexander dolls covering the company's history and entirely overturning the upper-class reputation of the dolls. Dolls from My Scene, Bratz, and Dora the Explorer—often cited as a Hispanic breakthrough into middle-class girls' lives—as well as the Japanese anime-styled Powerpuff Girls are additional actual or expected McDonald's cross-marketing products of the 1990s and 2000s.

Bratz entered the toy buying market for dolls in 2002–2003 and quickly surpassed Barbie in the doll market. The Bratz dolls have also cornered the European and Australian doll buying markets. They could do nothing wrong in interpreting the fashion trends of the early 2000s and provided an index of popular fashion as on-target as the documentary evidence of teen magazines such as Mademoiselle and Sixteen on the one hand and MTV on the other; however, they seem to have lost momentum as of 2007, likely a consequence of moving too close to the juvenile market and losing their competitive fashion edge. This is representative of a general slowdown and lack of insight characterizing the present state of the doll market. The Bratz have normalized themselves into conventional toys, with grooming animals and the French Bebe-styled large Bratz and girl Bratz. The punk-inspired anti-baby dolls, the fierce and streetwise Bratz Babies who look like infant biker molls (and whose bottles are, no doubt, filled with bourbon) and ride around in hotted-up prams, are perversely sinister, fascinating, but they no longer necessarily make for good fashion copy. However, they do represent an unexpected female incursion into the hyper-masculinized realm of biker imagery.

Disney Princesses were built up as a brand throughout the later 1990s into the 2000s. They are no longer periodical products incidental to film releases, but have remained ongoing offerings. Their marketing appeal is also buoyed by glaring presence of Disney videos/DVDs in every household—in contrast to former times, when the Disney classics would disappear from the screen and, therefore, from family and child consciousness for several years at a time. Disney Princess dolls are distinguished by their color schemes and now feature a range of subsidiary merchandise. They appear impossibly together on a joint product, cut loose from their originating narratives. The doll license was transferred from Mattel to the German company Simba during the past decade. Royal Doulton of England produces porcelain figurines of the Disney Princess characters. The Disney Fairies expanded from the slight stardom of Tinkerbell in Peter Pan to command various
non-cinematic videos of their own. The demand for fairy products in the new millennium is such that Bratz and Mattel have been obliged to develop subgenres as well as generic and “knock-off” fairies. These ladies are, of course, sanitized fairies—not the anarchic, society-destroying, baby-stealing, food-spoiling, hair-pulling, valiant hero—kidnapping fairies of uncensored folk myth. Girl-related videos from studios other than Disney, such as Anastasia, likewise have generated vast quantities of associated doll products in the past decade. Mattel dominates the overlapping doll–computer game market and in fact established this genre of girls’ toys.

The last decade has seen the revival of 1960s and 1970s dolls, including funky rag dolls as well as Blythe. More Blythes have probably been made in the twenty-first century than were ever made during the era of her first appearance. Bratz clones of all levels of quality and price point have emerged. Another trend that is currently extremely popular are anthropomorphic dolls such as the Fashion Kitties, which are, of course, unheimlich and disturbing images of women as atavistic and animalistic, signaling a return to old concepts of social and racial hierarchy that positioned women, children, imbeciles, and the non-white at the lower levels of civilization. Hello Kitty—in fact, a somewhat upper-class London cat according to her life narrative—is perhaps the most popular of all human-animal hybrids. She has traveled the world to establish an appeal that now may be more secure than Barbie’s, now encompassing more than three decades, since her debut on products in 1975 (the character was developed in storyboards a year or so earlier) but currently lacking the “crisis” of Barbie. Hello Kitty’s licensed-product range is generally considered to be the largest of all girls’ toys. In addition to her Japanese markets there are product lines specifically developed for girls’ and women’s markets in both Europe and North America. Their quantity and range make it hard to track Hello Kitty products outside their originating territories; like the Bratz line, they include references to established adult brands such as Chanel and Vuitton. The crossover indicates that the brand is being marketed to adults as well as children (as do adult-size Hello Kitty clothing and Hello Kitty electrical goods) even with the strictly juvenilizing tendency dominant in today’s doll market in Western cultures. Hello Kitty’s genial, high-spirited, open personality makes it sound blasphemous to mention social Darwinism and racial atavism in her presence.

DOLL CULTURE IN THE 2000s

Certainly the doll play market is shrinking and preschool girls (or their parents and guardians) now form the core market for dolls. The later part of the millennium’s opening decade is dominated by fairy and princess lines, which are distinctly repetitive and self-referencing. This steady infantilization of the play doll market with its stress on princesses and fairies is reducing the “fashion” elements. At the same time, interest in weird toy/ornament/mascot concepts is growing in older teen markets, thanks to the growing Asian influence in fashion consumption. This teen market does not currently cross over into that for conventional dolls.

Asian influences are opening up an older market as exemplified by Hello Kitty accessories for mature customers. One notes the ongoing focus on antique doll looks in Japanese fashion, especially the Sweet Lolita fashion subculture, which consciously imitates Victorian French dolls. The Lolita look (the name is taken from the novel but has remarkably purged the masculine sexuality inherent there) has placed dolls in a far more central position of culture than they usually are permitted to assume. Outside Japan
teenage and early 20s Lolitas must possess a special degree of courage, especially those whose public persona and styling include such details as Mary Pickford or Shirley Temple wigs. Due to the scorn for the extremely feminine in mainstream Western society (unless mediated by the male authority and authorizing persona of drag and transexuality), it is socially more acceptable to dress in clothing that is sexually explicit or that expresses violent rejection of the state, such as fashion characteristic of punk culture, than in Lolita “girlie” and doll styles. In many countries the Lolita spirit is reduced to a few doll-inflected gestures — lace gloves or Mary Jane shoes. In some countries (e.g., Ireland) the Lolita look is virtually nonexistent on the streets; in other countries, such as Australia and Britain, the look has been assimilated into more established fashion subcultures such as punk or Goth, which uphold rather than critique the fear of the excessively feminine as a sign of dependence and inappropriate citizenship. Although fashion forecasting agencies have been pushing both the Lolita look and images of late-nineteenth-century French dolls (and other elaborate and finely crafted dolls) as a suitable direction for the late “noughties,” customers have not responded. Forecasting is not quite the all-powerful conspiracy that it is assumed to be. If the doll is too radical a female concept to embracing, the Marie Antoinette look in the wake of Sofia Coppola’s film seems to have been taken up. This narrative successfully launches the idea of girlhood and pleasure, and its lush visual culture, pitted against the responsible white male state, although with the final implied warning that the state will destroy girlhood in the name of the people and their rights.

However, the exciting character of the edges of the doll market have not yet penetrated the center. The funky art-toy Blythe market does not meet the staid adult collector market, with its current obsession with the “rebirth” of baby dolls, a poignant and sinister indication of the limited roles of women in a neoconservative vision of society. Nor does the funky art-toy market touch fairy and princess child consumers. In some cases the current failure of Mattel is due not to inability within the firm but to the customers’ inability to move as quickly or see as broadly as does Mattel. The collector market is highly conservative and the family market seems to want a limited, predictable range of products. Mattel’s sophisticated urban dolls the Magic Circle disappeared, as did their social opposites, the Flavas. The doll apophasis has yet to happen, and boys’ toys such as train sets and digital war games or do-it-yourself cardboard Eiffel Towers still have more currency as social metaphor than girls’ toys. Both a core sample of the specific nature and experience of girlhood and a metaphor of girlhood universal in its resonances, the doll speaks of the — often overlooked — importance of girls’ culture within a wider social context.

Further Reading


Juliette Peers
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